

The Harriman Institute

Forum



Summer Intermezzo

Order Out of Chaos, A Tale of Perestroika

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I. Prelude—Adagio Skepticismo

This tale is about music, a physicist, Russians and bureaucracy, though perhaps in reverse order. As a rule, tales should be embellished to the edge of absurdity, not beyond. But since this story threatens to topple over the brink without assistance, any invention or exaggeration on my part is strictly unnecessary.

The events get underway innocently in Moscow, the Big Onion, in the winter of 1982. That year the first snows had fallen on October 10. Leonid Brezhnev died a few weeks later, though his body was expected to live forever; I was cooped up in a 40-watt room the size of two coffins at Moscow State University on Lenin Hills. You have seen the edifice in the *Guinness Book of World Records* above the caption "World's largest university building." Ostensibly I was studying the early universe while at the Shternberg Astronomical Institute but a steady diet of borshch and boiled eggs led me astray. I went to the theatre and got drunk (vodka was still available). I also collected Soviet oboe music.

The hobby is not quite so eccentric as the collection of barbed wire or antique spark plugs. It happens that I am an amateur oboist. Long ago I toyed with the idea of playing professionally but, in perhaps the only sensible decision of my life, I abandoned that insane course of action. Nevertheless I remain proficient on the instrument and have on more than one occasion been mistaken for a union member. The crucial fact for this tale (which makes it more interesting than the usual romances about violinists or pianists) is that the oboe repertoire is far from extensive. Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky did not champion the oboe. Pasculli, Brod, Daelli and other nineteenth-century composers who wrote for it have not exactly found their niches on Parnassus. To be honest, virtually all oboe music written from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th is worthless. The one hundred-year abyss in the repertoire partially explains why oboists (and other wind players) tend to be more adventurous in their tastes than string players, for whom music died with Brahms. There are other reasons as well, but those are the subject of another essay. Still, it should now be easier to appreciate why, when foraging for food in the Big Onion, I also did not hesitate to buy what little I found in Soviet music stores.

Most was crap. Whether more nonsense is published in the US or the USSR is a debatable question. If I encounter more there than here I suspect it is because certain editors connected with the Soviet Composers Union tends to promote the fortunes of young, unknown Georgian and Armenian composers by arranging for publication of their works. In principle the activity is a useful one but possible side effects are easily imagined.

Among my purchases was an album entitled simply "Pieces for Solo Oboe," published in 1982 by Soviet Composer, the Composers Union outlet, in an edition of 1900 copies. Price: 85 kopeks, about \$1.50 at the old exchange rate, about 15 cents at the new one, in either case about the cost of a double bowl of *pelmeni* (with sour cream).

The value of the contents corresponded closely to the price. You will find plenty of village scenes in which the sun, during its daily course, rises cheerily over peasant children immersed in their innocent games, and casts its beneficent rays over quarrelling husbands and wives. You will find Chuvash dances and the dance of a woodland sprite. Those hearts touched by black-vel-

vet paintings of sad clowns and wide-eyed puppies sold on Texas roadsides would positively melt at one of these village fairs. My own heart undergoes a different sort of palpitation. But one should remove glass shards from the soul: even Shostakovich wrote songs in praise of Stalin and in 1982 Stalin's shadow had not faded. At the other extreme, the album contains a number of avant-garde works, obviously written under the influence of oboist Heinz Holliger's German school. These pieces abound in obscure notation and the specialized effects which were popular in American music of the late 1960s. The resulting squeaks, squawks, and gurgles sometimes lead me to speak of "piss and fart" music. What such exercises do not do is touch the heart, yet alone melt it.

I would have been tempted to shelve the album next to my "Tamerlane's mausoleum" night light were it not for a single piece that stood head and shoulders above the rest: a "Little Triptych" composed in 1975 by one Aleksandr Raskatov. The triptych was not so little (a performance would run about 10 minutes); it lay well under the fingers, so well I thought the composer must surely be an oboist, and at the same time it had what most modern oboe music lacks: a singing line. The oboe is among the most lyrical of instruments, yet in this century, when not portraying village roosters, it is invariably called upon to sneer, cackle, piss, and fart. Raskatov managed to avoid both banality and absurdity. The last movement in particular was stunning, building an extended line up to one of the most exciting climaxes for oboe I had ever encountered. Were I forced to compare the "Little Triptych" to another work, I could choose only Benjamin Britten's *Six Metamorphoses After Ovid* for the approximate idiom and level of technical difficulty and the quality. The odd oboist reading this memoir will understand I am bestowing upon the triptych high praise: Britten's *Metamorphoses* are considered among the century's best oboe music.

II. Glasnost Tango

When I made my break for the West on the last day of May 1983, the triptych came with me. I continued to study the piece off and on over the next three years and performed it several

times at informal gatherings. There the matter went into hibernation.

By October of 1986 glasnost was underway and the number of friendship walks, friendship marathons, friendship sleigh-rides and friendship barbecues had risen sharply. Passing through Princeton, my home, was a delegation of Soviet composers. A joint concert of Soviet-Princeton modern music was scheduled to take place on campus and, more out of a sense of obligation than interest, at the last minute I decided to attend, managing to overcome my instinctive dread of village fairs and Chuvash dances.

Any fears were unwarranted. The bilateral venture was serious, professional. Most interesting and suprising to those present was that the Soviets clearly carried the day. American composers and cognoscenti sneer at Soviet attempts at the avant garde, regarding them as derivative and ten years behind the times, if not twenty. To a large extent this is true. The world of the average Soviet artist is much more limited than that of his Western counterpart. Until recently severe censorship limited the subjects that could be openly explored, a general isolation continues to filter out influences from abroad and, perhaps most important, an interior orthodoxy of the Russian tends not to disturb things at rest. The result is not so much derivative as backwards, and the backwardness is immediately apparent at any concert or art exhibit—particularly the latter where the surrealism of the 1930s and 40s is continually being recreated and where glasnost has unleashed an avalanche of adolescent erotic fantasies.

(The \$400,000 price paid at a Sotheby's auction for a piece of recent Soviet art shows only that the buyers have yet to traipse through the innumerable galleries and *salons*, hidden in hotels, in garages, on embankments, in suburbs, where thousands of such artists have infused their canvases with the worst motifs from the new comic-book school of the West. I do not consider them true artists, let alone Russian artists.)

Many Russians are aware of the shortcomings, vaguely sensing that Soviet artists should do better. A more common reaction among artists, though, is a chauvinism, a chauvinism finding its most extreme expression in the writings of Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn. Just so, just so! We must stand before the West

to show them that Russian music is much more skillful, the flowering of a long tradition. Western art preaches the negation of tradition, almost anti-tradition. It is devoid of roots and he who renounces his roots renounces God. Just so. Ironically, Russians name many of their works and theatres "experiment."

Having said this, it must be admitted that American art, especially the type produced at universities, may be sophisticated by comparison but has become intellectualized to the point of disassociation from the emotions and ultimately from the audience. American art increasingly gives the impression of being created by people who have read, have listened, have watched, but have not lived.

I am not the first to voice this complaint but I saw its truth clearly at the Princeton concert where the American works were greeted by indifference and the Soviet works by warm applause. A little sophistication is willingly sacrificed for accessibility (but not too much: Philip Glass' music is for brain-dead people; Steve Reich's for the mildly retarded). Most successful on the program proved to be an unaccompanied clarinet piece by Zarrina Mirshakar, a young composer from Tadjikistan. The solo impressed me enough that I sought out Mirshakar during intermission to ask whether she had written anything for oboe.

"No, but I'd be happy to."

"Well then, let me commission something from you."

Mirshakar ran off with glee but the request surprised me as much as it did her. The pockets of a vagabond scholar rarely have more than holes in them and thirty-odd years of life and six trips to the Soviet Union had yet to include the commission of a piece of music. At a reception following the concert I spoke again to Mirshakar and she agreed to look into the details. During our conversation I mentioned Raskatov's triptych, how well it was written and asked if she had any idea who the mysterious composer was. "Sasha Raskatov? Oh yes, he lives in Moscow."

If I were to say, "At the time I could not know it, but that innocent conversation sealed my fate," I would sound like the author of wretched paperback romances, but it would largely be true.

III. Moderato Thrifticoso

Within several months Mirshakar wrote, suggesting I get in touch with G. Schirmer, the New York music publisher, to formally arrange a commission. At Schirmer's, unknown to the world at large, is a small band of enthusiasts who spend much of their time dealing with Soviet music and musicians. In fact, Schirmer is the American arm of VAAP, which literally stands for—vanity of vanities—the All Union Agency of Authors' Rights. VAAP is pronounced VA-AP. By any pronunciation it is the notorious Soviet Copyright Agency.

Until recently, when one published the work of a Soviet author abroad, VAAP received the royalties, not the author. When one commissioned a work from a Soviet composer, one paid VAAP, not the composer. This wonder of communism is similar to American author-agent agreements: VAAP does little or nothing to promote its charges and receives a substantial cut. Unsubstantiated rumors have long had it that VAAP takes up to seventy percent of the income; at Schirmer they mentioned 30%. (I now have reason to believe it is may be closer to 20 %.)

The inequity is the first reason why it is vastly cheaper to commission a work from a Soviet composer than an American composer. Schirmer discouraged me from offering a large payment (an unnecessary precaution), knowing that the composer is not getting a fair share. A more important reason is that Soviet salaries are roughly ten times lower than American salaries. If you paid \$1000 for a piece, a small commission by our standards, then even at the old official exchange rate it would represent three months salary for the average Soviet. If you bypassed VAAP and illegally paid the composer directly in hard currency, \$1000 would represent a substantial black-market fortune. A third reason why it pays to buy Soviet music is that Russians have spent their lives in a country where a chronic shortage of everything (except philosophy) has robbed them of an advanced sense of the value of money. One of the triumphs of perestroika is that it has destroyed the world's last outpost where people occasionally did something for the pleasure of it.

The actual commissioning process proved to be straightforward and informal. Valeria Giannini at Schirmer merely telexed VAAP to request that Mirshakar write me an oboe piece. Financial arrangements were not mentioned at the time; apparently it is assumed that the customer has discussed such matters with the composer. Soon a reply was received indicating that Mirshakar had accepted the commission.

But even before the technicalities were seen to, the plot turned, transforming a short story into a saga. In early 1987, at about the time I received Mirshakar's note, a letter arrived from Moscow bearing an unfamiliar return address. "The author of the 'Little Triptych' for oboe, Aleksandr Raskatov is writing to you," it began. "At our agency for authors' rights they have recently informed me that you perform my work and have kindly given me your address. It was very pleasant to hear you like the composition..." Raskatov went on to request any programs or posters from my concerts and wished me "new creative success." Then: "P.S. It would give me great pleasure to write something for you personally."

Ah. An extraordinary offer from a kindred spirit, toiling unsung in a sordid Moscow garret; here is the Russian soul in its purest, most admirable incarnation. Russian soul? Please, its very mention gives me brain fever. The *zagadochnaya* Russian soul was a monstrous fiction invented by 19th-century romantics who needed to sell memoirs to an unsuspecting public weaned on tales of far-off lands and honey dew. Can you not recognize a window being cut open to the West when you see one? *From here we will threaten the Americans.*

That may have been. Nevertheless, despite any possible ulterior motives on the composer's part, I chose not to see them and was carried away. I was convinced, and remain convinced, that I would never receive such an offer from an American composer.

Although the number of my concert appearances these days was severely limited, I explained to Raskatov in a letter, if he desired I would be happy to commission a work from him. I suggested another oboe solo or a quartet for oboe and strings. Raskatov countered that my ideas were "very interesting" but that he would prefer to write me a "not-large chamber concerto" for oboe, strings and "perhaps one other decorative instrument."

A concerto. The number of oboe concertos written in this century is not large, the number of memorable concertos is pitiful: the Martinu, the Vaughn Williams, the Strauss...a few others known only to oboists. Who was a cosmologist to refuse a concerto? If I could enrich the repertoire I would.

Raskatov requested I get in touch with VAAP; Valeria at Schirmer dutifully sent off another telex.

IV. Fugue Internationale

Another eight months of hibernation set in and with it a digression. A member of the Moscow Philharmonic had told me that Boris Tishchenko, Leningrad's leading composer, had composed a woodwind quintet. If so, I would have liked to get my hands on it. But Laurel Fay, Schirmer's resident expert on Soviet music, maintained the piece did not exist. I would have to write to Tishchenko himself to be sure.

Any citizen of the 21st century would naturally think the existence of a Tishchenko quintet should be easy enough to verify in a Moscow music catalog, but such naivete points out the single most important difference between the US and the USSR: in the Soviet Union information is scarcer than caviar and hence more valuable, whereas in the US information is as common as prime-time television and consequently worthless.

The Soviet information gap, due to an absence of any conceivable sort of data base, is completely compatible with one of the most primitive aspects of Soviet life: its lack of formality. Until last year (more or less) there were essentially no agents, no agencies, no administrative assistants. Whether you wanted to reach Evgeny Nesterenko, the Bolshoi's leading bass, or Andrei Sakharov, you merely got his phone number from a friend and called. If the structure of America is crystalline, with information bonds stretching from coast to coast, the Soviet Union is closer to a gas or an amorphous solid where the informational links are no longer than the distance from friend to friend. Another of perestroika's triumphs is the introduction of the booking agency.

So I wrote to Tishchenko care of the Leningrad Composers Union. Laurel Fay proved to be correct—there was no quintet. By this time, though, I had lost my inhibitions: if Tishchenko hadn't written one he should, or if not a quintet, then a trio for

oboe, viola and piano. Why such an unlikely ensemble? Oboe and piano alone form an unnatural combination; the timbres blend at best poorly and the result is two solitary instruments, each marching to its own drummer. The problem was solved admirably in 1905, when the violinist and composer Charles Martin Loeffler (who, though born an Alsatian, became a Bostonian after protracted navigation through Kiev and Berlin), wrote his utterly unique *Two Rhapsodies for oboe, viola and piano*. The alto voice of the sadly neglected viola provides just the right glue to bind the wayward oboe and piano together and the resulting chorus is as lucious as any heard on the face of the earth. But as you may imagine, the inclusion of not one, but two unlikely instruments makes the piece an oddity, with the unhappy result that it is rarely performed. I thought it high time to call a companion into existence.

Tishchenko agreed and my excitement could hardly be contained. Although, as I soon discovered, Moscow composers with avant-garde tendencies are hostile toward Tishchenko because he is not an innovator, he remains Dmitri Shostakovich's foremost student and exponent of Shostakovich's school. One hundred years from now, only specialists will care whether American composers were ten years ahead of Moscow composers and whether Moscow composers were ten years ahead of Leningrad composers. Normal bipeds will care only whether the music was good. Since I could not commission a piece from Shostakovich, I would do the next best thing.

Toward the end of 1987 word arrived from Valeria at Schirmer that Mirshakar's piece was nearly complete and the time had come to formally discuss payment. We telexed VAAP with an offer of \$500 for whatever Mirshakar had produced. How did I arrive at this remarkable figure? "Cat in a bag" is Russian for "pig in a poke"; cat or pig, I assumed my purchase resembled a sonata. I have never written a sonata but the amount of work involved must be closer to a short story or article than to a novel. Poor journals rarely pay me more than \$500 for a short story, not close to minimum wage, usually. Mirshakar would suffer the same capitalistic fate.

About the same time, word came that Raskatov was also nearing the completion of his labors. Again I offered \$500. Other things being equal, a concerto surely ought to be worth more than a sonata, but the fact that Raskatov had approached me argued for a discount and, to repeat, an intellectual vagabond's finances spoke louder than esthetics. I do not apologize. Raskatov got his money's worth; that will become clear enough.

It happened that in December 1987, I was to attend a scientific conference in India. By now, glasnost was in full swing and, although two and one-half years earlier I had sworn an oath never to set foot in the Soviet Union again, news reports had made me curious enough to give that benighted country a seventh glance. Thus, on Christmas eve 1987, enroute from India to the United States, I appeared unannounced on Raskatov's Moscow doorstep. The shock was absolute.

Sasha Raskatov turned out to be my age, to within seven weeks. At first I regarded this as a coincidence (and it may have been) but it is not inconceivable that something in his music spoke to a contemporary. Certainly believers of secret affinities, synchronicity and magnetic influences will find support for their theories here. Sasha had graduated the Moscow Conservatory, which he regarded as "four wasted years," due to his excellent pre-conservatory training, he paid the rent by composing film scores and in general lived off his commissions. He had written a piano and a cello concerto, music for percussion, a cantata, much chamber music and had recently been commissioned to write a viola sonata by Yuri Bashmet, the Soviet Union's leading violinist.

The oboe concerto was in the process of being recopied and I saw only a few pages of it. Judgement would have to be withheld until I had it under my fingers. Raskatov also played tapes of several of his compositions, none of which impressed me as much as the triptych, which as it turned out, he had been forced to write at the conservatory at the age of 22. Later, when I heard a performance of the piano concerto (played by his wife Olya, who is herself both a fine composer and virtuoso pianist) I came to regard it as an excellent work. But at the time, I began to wonder whether I would receive a cat instead of a concerto.

Nevertheless, Raskatov and I hit it off very well and several days later I found myself at the headquarters of VAAP itself, facing across a conference table four officials of the Soviet Copyright Agency, who held pads and pencils in their hands and a telexed offer of \$500 for a concerto between us. They wished to confirm the figure. As delicately as possible I justified my feeble offer, explaining that my finances prohibited a more generous sum and, anyway, Sasha himself had offered to write it. They understood I was not a large corporation, the head of the music division politely replied, and he turned to ask Sasha whether the amount was acceptable to him.

Sasha was caught off guard. He had not expected a kopek, he later explained in private. Then why on earth had he asked me to get in touch with VAAP, which obligated me to pay a commission? Sasha admitted that he knew nothing about how such things worked. Clearly, he had even less of a business sense than I. Still, artists should be paid for their work; I regretted only that he would be getting rubles minus VAAP's cut—zero minus zero—when I could have handed him 500 genuine dollars.

A Soviet composer's ignorance of VAAP's role in the commissioning process points again to the amorphous nature of the Soviet Union (a state to become ever more transparent), but there was more to be learned from our meeting at the Copyright Agency. I had come with a proposal of my own: would VAAP help arrange a Moscow production of a play I had written if Raskatov composed music to it? The VAAP officials reacted favorably to the idea and requested that I send a copy of the script. If all this sounds entirely mercenary, it is. Tourists, feasted at Moscow hotels, are frequently taken in by Russian generosity (an oxymoron). If the traveler is overwhelmed by the gifts he receiveth on the first visit, he would be wise not to go back for a second. It may be said truly that what first appeareth to be generosity is merely business and barter you must. They who have traded most with the Russe know best to heed the golden rule: ask unto them no less than they would ask unto you. No, ask ten times more and even then you shall be humiliated. The Russe hath a quality that brooks no defeat in the game of upping the stakes. As will be apparent to the skeptic who girdeth his loins and continues.

A month later in America, Valeria phoned me. The Mirshakar piece was in hand. A few days later it was in mine. Mirshakar had written a six-page long unaccompanied sonata. It had nothing in common with the clarinet solo I had heard a year earlier. Instead, after an exciting start which raises great expectations, the artist introduces ever more specialized techniques favored by the German school (especially flutter-tonguing, in order to appreciate the difficulty of which on the oboe, the reader should attempt to roll his r's with his forefinger thrust squarely into his mouth) that would make the piece inaccessible to most mortal performers. Mirshakar's piece was not exactly of the "piss and fart" school (for Asian people cannot avoid melody), but neither could she resist the temptation to exploit the oboe to its fullest, with the result that she was carried beyond the horizons of her less-adventurous contemporaries. Even if the sonata could be played who, in post-modern America, where music and architecture have regressed sixty years, would want to? I struggled with the piece for several months, vainly squeaking, squawking and spitting in order to achieve the wished-for effects, but failing in the end to achieve satisfactory results, and the sonata remains sadly unperformed. So ended my first commission.

In her phone call, Valeria proposed another escalation. A giant festival of Soviet music, organized by Sarah Caldwell, was to be held in Boston next month. Afterwards, Schirmer was planning to host some of the composers in New York. Would I agree to help escort and translate? Moreover, if I was interested, Schirmer would provide me with free tickets to the festival concerts themselves. Why not?

Gathered in Boston for the festival were all the leading Soviet composers: Alfred Schnittke, Sophia Gubaydulina, Boris Tishchenko, Rodion Shchedrin and a host of others. Now widely known in the West, Schnittke is currently the Soviet Union's most famous composer. Of his works the cello concerto is probably most moving to me, although most widely played is the Concerto Grosso No. 1, dating from 1976-1977, in which can be heard a tango as well as passages reminiscent of Vivaldi. Schnittke's fans, who are legion, resent the term "eclectic"; his music is "polystylistic." I am a physicist. Schnittke has remarked that he

views the history of music as a continuum from which he can pick and choose what he wants. In any event, it must be admitted that the business of quoting and paraphrasing in art has become positively epidemic. One is forced to wonder whether in the late 20th century, the terrain is already so overgrown, not only with uncountable lost souls, groping about blindly, but with every conceivable idea, style and fashion, that the only path for the hapless artist is to parody the giants who have preceded him.

Gubaydulina, too, is riding a wave of popularity, though recordings of her works are harder to come by; listen to her "Seven Last Words of Christ" for accordion. Tishchenko remains known in the West almost solely for his 1963 cello concerto, written for a bottomheavy orchestra of winds and brass "according to the laws of paradox and the absurd." Shostakovich liked the piece so much that he reorchestrated it "according to the laws of intellect and reason," with the result that it is an entirely different composition. His more recent Violin Concerto No. 2 carries traditional virtuosity to extremes. Shchedrin's best work is undoubtedly the opera *Dead Souls* based on Gogol's novel, but in the Bolshoi Ballet's repertoire are also *Anna Karenina* and *The Seagull*, written for his wife Maya Plisetskaya and filled with quotations from Tchaikovsky.

The festival itself turned out to be a financial disaster, perhaps responsible for Boston's current recession, but that story has been chronicled elsewhere and I need not go into it. In any case my main duties were in Manhattan.

"Ah, so you're the one I've been corresponding with," said Tishchenko when I presented myself to him. He reiterated his intention to write me a trio and questioned me on some technical matters. I must have convinced him of my abilities, for later that evening he introduced me to Chari Nurimov, a Turkmen composer, as "an oboe professor at Princeton University." My astonishment was extreme when Nurimov, showing a keen interest in my professional duties, pressed me to know whether I played with an orchestra or as a soloist. Taken aback, I could do no more than sputter, "sometimes both," and the next day I regretted even that feeble utterance when Nurimov clasped my hand warmly in his and ceremoniously introduced me, before a rolling television camera, as "the internationally celebrated oboe soloist." To my infinite disappointment, no booking agencies

have contacted me, but I saw that the moment of my inevitable compromise approached and the False Dmitri lost no time in escaping to New York.

If until now it seems the Soviet bureaucracy has been functioning reasonably well, in Boston was revealed the first hint of its true nature. VAAP neglected to inform Gubaydulina, Tishchenko and Shchedrin of the New York tour with the result that they returned to the Soviet Union and the post-festival festivities nearly collapsed. A reduced delegation did arrive in Manhattan, however, for a week of seminars and shopping. My primary responsibility was to act as companion and guide for Georgi Dmitriev, who was then head of the Moscow Branch of the Soviet Composers Union.

Someone should do a study on where Americans get their ideas about the Soviet Union. At a public meeting at the City College of New York, we listened to the chairman of the music department explain to the audience how the Composers Union provided housing for its members, provided them with a living wage and bought their works. That night I was sitting next to Schnittke and translating for him. As I relayed the chairman's remarks, Schnittke's face took on an ever greater expression of disbelief until I finally felt obliged to say, "I'm just translating. If you disagree, tell him."

Schnittke demured. But later in the evening the misimpressions compounded to the point where he finally said in his gentle manner, "I don't know about anyone else, but the Composers Union never provided *me* with an apartment." The others agreed. It soon became clear that neither does the Composers Union provide a living wage or buy composers' works. It does provide creative retreats outside of large cities, where for 90 rubles a month a composer can work two months out of the year without distractions. It does sponsor several concert series, in particular the Moscow Autumn Festival, to showcase Moscow composers. There is cooperative apartment house in central Moscow which 35 years ago was owned by the Composers Union and where many musical families, including Raskatov's, still live, leasing apartments for about 40 rubles per month. The building has been declared a danger zone and signs are hung on it warning pedestrians to approach no closer than two meters. The Ministry

of Culture sometimes buys completed scores. As for that honor, Raskatov tells how at a recent festival in London one of his percussion pieces was performed. For her labors on the bass drum, his wife Olya received 200 pounds sterling. Sasha, for his labors in composition, received 150 rubles from the Ministry of Culture.

Other revelations awaited in New York. On the following day I received a concerto for oboe and fifteen string instruments by Aleksandr Raskatov. This work from a foreign land was dedicated to me, an honor I appreciated and that would unlikely ever be repeated. Unlike Mirshakar's piece, Raskatov's was technically more conventional. It did require the performer at one point to hit a note so high (B-flat) a hernia would surely result, and at another point to sound two notes simultaneously—a so-called double harmonic on B-flat and F—and to hold them for eleven bars. And in a few places to flutter tongue on the lowest notes of the instrument. Otherwise it appeared perfectly feasible.

Dmitriev was sitting at my side when I had my first good look at the score. "How is it?" he wanted to know.

"As far as I can tell it looks like a real piece."

At that moment Dmitriev pronounced, with all the authority of his office, "If you and Raskatov are agreed, I can promise that it will be played at the Moscow Autumn Festival with a good soloist. We'll send you a tape."

V. Concerto *Ochen Grosso*

The game was afoot, as has been said. My initial reaction to Dmitriev's proposal was ambivalent. Legally I was entitled to premiere the concerto, which I would have liked to do with a local orchestra. There was another consideration as well. The sound of a Soviet oboe instils in me an aversion I can only liken to that produced by a fist coiled around the neck of a duck in heat. If I were forced to sacrifice the premiere, it would *never*—before the crayfish whistles on the hill—be to a Soviet oboist.

All this was a bit premature; I had not even practiced the piece. But a few days with it persuaded me that Raskatov might have produced a genuine work, though without an orchestra it

was easy to fall into delusion. Unfortunately, the groups I contacted failed to show any interest in the concerto; to them it was just another score to be lost or gather dust. To me the concerto was more special and I felt obliged to get it performed, even if vanity had to take a back seat. So I would give up the premiere, but not to a Soviet.

I would give it up to Theodore Baskin. It was my good fortune to have met Baskin when he was a student at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute and when I was about to enroll at nearby Swarthmore College. For two years we philosophized together, drank together, made reeds together, and once or twice played a job together. Since our lyceum days Ted has become principal oboist of the Montreal Symphony under Charles Dutoit. He is one of the world's greatest oboists, with a technique to match Holliger's, a beautiful tone that still occasionally betrays its Philadelphia origins and a performance standard which invariably leaves the impression that an intelligence is behind every note.

With his heavy orchestral duties and fanatical practicing habits, Ted has been a less than virtuosic correspondent in recent years. To rouse him I sent the scores of the Raskatov and the Mirshakar with a mock-formal letter: "Tony Rothman hereby grants Theodore Baskin the right to premiere the concerto by Aleksandr Raskatov and the sonata by Zarrina Mirshakar at the Moscow Autumn Festival and grants him exclusive performance rights for one year from the date of the premiere." His curiosity was piqued and he agreed to perform.

Thus began my career as an impresario, which was to last 20 months too long. Although I immediately informed Raskatov of Ted's willingness to participate, the problem of cabbage, which is paradoxically found everywhere and nowhere in the Soviet Union, remained. Even at Dmitriev's initial attempt to usurp the premiere, I hinted that were I to sacrifice the performance I would prefer it be to Baskin, but Dmitriev countered that money (like sugar) was rationed and that the Composers Union generally paid only local expenses. Falling prey to an attack of idiocy, I replied that travel funds might be available from the West. We agreed to think about it.

By now it should be apparent that the Soviet concept of money differs from ours. Write a concerto for free. Why not? Payment for commissions? We'll talk about it later. As any number of Russians have put it, "One doesn't work for money." The American attitude, of course, is that of Johnson: anyone working for anything other than money is a blockhead.

Manifold are the difficulties caused by the philosophical mismatch. Soon Ted received a telex from the Composers Union inviting him to perform the Raskatov Oboe Concerto at the Moscow Autumn Festival on November 20, 1988. No travel expenses, no fee. Ted would play for adventure (already something unique from a professional musician) but to expect him to lose money was more of a soldier's tale than we had bargained for. Yet my loose remarks evidently gave VAAP and the Composers Union, not to mention Raskatov, the idea I was going to find travel funds. In a fashion soon to become excruciatingly familiar, rather than confirming whether this rich American patron of the arts and internationally celebrated oboist had in fact gotten travel funds, they scheduled the concert.

At work here was perhaps the most important philosophical principle in Russian culture: miracles. Anyone who has applied for a Soviet visa has waited until a week before departure, then five days—the blood pressure is rising—then three days, forty-eight hours—you are about to cancel the trip...Suddenly—there it is. New Year's champagne has vanished from the Big Onion. Impossible to find. No chance. But December 31, early morning, the sun has hardly risen, you are at the market and—there it is. Out of nowhere, no four hours in line, snatch it up. Light a candle to God.

Reliance on miracles was an important part of life in the pre-Newtonian middle ages when information was scarce and the concept of causality had yet to be invented. Armies were saved not by tactical excellence but by phalanxes of angels who swept through the air until it was dark and there was a great wailing that put fear into the hearts of the enemy...; famines were visited on the country not by a climactic anomaly but in return for our sins. Paradoxically, because the Soviet Union resembles a gas or at best an amorphous solid, information is still scarce and reliance on miracles remains part of the Russian psychic makeup. As I write these pages the entire country is held in thrall by one

Kashpirovsky, a "psychotherapist" who claims to heal millions simultaneously by televised hypnosis. When you call an American airline three times for an arrival schedule, you get the same answer three times. When you call Aeroflot, you get three different responses. Information has not passed the distance between operators because there are no structural bonds linking them. The behavior of molecules in a gas is random, apparently acausal. When causality is absent anything is permitted.

Physicists are not known for their belief in miracles and I doubted that if the concert was to be saved it would be by an angel. Susan Feder, Vice President at Schirmer's, advised me that the Soviets had paid travel expenses for the artists involved in the recent Leningrad International Music Festival and could be pressed. This was consistent with my experience: say yes longer than a Russian can say no and victory shall be yours. In any case, why should a ticket on Aeroflot cost them any money? Susan suggested that Baskin telex them politely, acknowledge the honor and request travel funds. Ted's wife Karen, herself a Montreal Symphony cellist, had naively taken on the role of Ted's secretary for this venture and did as she was told.

Neither was Raskatov idle. Acting on my dire warnings telexed to him from *Scientific American* (where I had recently taken up an unfortunate residence) through VAAP, he spent days, if not weeks, running about Moscow attempting to extract funds from every conceivable organization. "I could have written another concerto instead," he recalled. As a result of our efforts Baskin received a second telex: You are cordially invited to play at the Moscow Autumn Festival. No expenses. No fee.

Gorbachev, so the rumor went, had recently introduced a measure requiring organizations like the Composers Union to pay hard currency for airline tickets of foreign guests. The angels of Fate had marshaled their forces against us and the great thundering of perestroika deafened us with its dissonant trumpets until Time itself began to crack asunder. Baskin, virtuoso that he was, would need a few weeks to master the concerto and, more to the point, the Montreal Symphony management required two months' notice for a leave of absence.

Confidence in the mission was further shaken by a run-through of the concerto I organized in August at Bennington College's summer music conference. The orchestra, consisting of

amateurs with opinions of themselves not exactly in accord with their natural endowments, was forced to read from the large copies of the score I had painstakingly prepared. Why? Because the scribe I had hired to make parts, seeing his opportunity to swindle a man in desperate straits, failed to complete the job in the time agreed and charged me twice his estimate to boot. Death and fatality! I wasted \$600 on the useless parts, more than I had paid for the concerto itself, and was angry enough to sue. In return for my pains the members of my band all hated the piece. One violinist, completely unable to withstand the torture of having to play a work from his own century, jumped to his feet and stormed out halfway through. Another impaled me afterwards: "You call this music?"

Who could say? To massacre a composition requires merely amateurs. To hear through chaos requires a higher level of professionalism. But a Bennington amateur, like the admirable professional he is, always has one eye on the clock. And what of it? At most one eye, or one hand, is needed to play a new composition. Two, why that is totally superfluous. So, our little comedy was over, my hour was up and now I was to get Baskin to Moscow for a piece nobody liked.

And I didn't even have a clear idea of how to do that. From Schirmer's came a suggestion: the National Endowment for the Arts had a special fund to send musicians to festivals. Why hadn't they told me months ago? A phonecall to Washington confirmed the fund's existence. To apply I needed only write a letter. I did so immediately, explaining in a breath that I had commissioned a concerto from a Soviet composer Raskatov, that a performance was scheduled for November 20th, that Theodore Baskin of the Montreal Symphony had agreed to give the premiere and that the only thing lacking was money.

My communicae was apparently too laconic. In early September I got a call from Beverly Kratochvil, the Program Director for International Activities, who informed me that the application had caused "some discussion" and that the council was curious as to how the commission had come about. It is unusual to receive an application from an individual. "You aren't an orchestra or a council for the arts, are you?"

"No, I'm a physicist who plays the oboe."

"Why did you commission a piece from a Soviet instead of an American composer?"

There was only one answer: "Because I like his music."

To my great surprise, about three weeks later, in the fastest action in US government history, Kratochvil informed me that Baskin was to be awarded a grant for 1989 (1988 funds already being allocated). But government momentum is not to be stopped and before the New Year a \$1000 check was in hand. It was \$8 less than Pan Am's New York-Moscow excursion fare, it arrived three weeks too late to release Baskin for the Moscow Autumn Festival. The Raskatov concerto was announced in the program booklet. The IRS attempted to tax me for the grant. A business trip for *Scientific American*, carefully orchestrated to have me in Moscow by November 20, was cancelled by the Editor in Chief. My phone bill to Montreal registered 5.2 on the Richter scale. So ended our first attempt at a world premiere.

VI. Round Two – Intermezzo

We now had \$1000 and four stipulations from the NEA: Baskin had to attend precisely a festival, he must give a seminar or master class, the NEA must be acknowledged in the program and, if possible, an American work should appear on the concert. Of course Baskin's schedule also had to be met. The Montrealers play forty-odd weeks out of the year and the orchestra was scheduled for a month-long tour to Asia in autumn 1989. Those were the Western requirements.

Meanwhile, Moscow: Raskatov had concluded the Moscow Autumn Festival was a disaster, the festival orchestra worthless and under no circumstances was his concerto to be performed by them. Acting on his own he contacted Salius Sondetskis, a highly regarded Lithuanian conductor, who agreed to premiere the work at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow with his Vilnius Chamber Orchestra. Sondetskis gave us a choice of dates in June 1989; Baskin accepted the 17th; Susan Feder telexed VAAP with a request to help organize the concert and an explanation of the NEA's requirements. Was this a festival? I hadn't the faintest idea. I raise my goblet to joint ventures. There, now it's a festival.

A phone call: Classical Artists International has been informed that Tony Rothman is a renowned authority on Russian

music. Would he be willing to write the program notes for the Ossipov Balalaika Orchestra's Carnegie Hall appearance...? Ossipov Balalaika Orchestra...?

Some time after our telex is launched into the ether confirming Baskin's intent to play with Sondetskis, VAAP cables a reply: "The dates you suggest are inconvenient for maestro Sondetskis." "Whaat?!" will badly approximate my screech to Susan over the telephone. But of course Susan has no more information; the dates are inconvenient for maestro Sondetskis, that's all. An apology? Behold, I will send you Elijah: *Ya ne vinovat*, the most popular phrase in Russian, "I am not guilty." Susan then gracefully signed off; Schirmer would play no further role in this affair, we were on our own.

The mystery was illuminated (somewhat) in April when this miserable sinner traveled to Moscow for *Scientific American* and, during my first night in the Big Onion, suffering from jet lag and an inflexible tongue, I met Sondetskis at Raskatov's apartment. We spoke to him for three hours, trying to find a way out of the impasse. I understood nothing, a fact I blamed on my presence in the wrong space and time zone and the 16-month gap in my Russian. But Sasha's Russian was in perfect condition and he had not understood anything either. That worried me.

Sondetskis was willing to conduct, could request a hall, but official and even local arrangements for foreigners (for instance hotel accommodations) would have to be handled through Gosconcert, the state concert agency, and that would take an unimaginable amount of time. In any case, since the new laws allowing some private enterprise went into effect a year ago, everyone (notably conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky) was defecting from the thieves and bandits at Gosconcert to new cooperative agencies and the concert world structure was disintegrating like the rest of the Soviet Union taking with it all possibility of comprehension. What it boiled down to was that Sondetskis had received an invitation to conduct in London during June and took it.

VII. Round Three – Bandwagon Waltz

Few are lonelier than an exhausted and defeated man hailing a cab to his hotel at 2:00 A.M. on Gorky Street. But I had been

traveling to the Soviet Union for 10 years and had suffered every conceivable indignity except deportation—and that had been threatened. By now I viewed the concerto as a form of revenge. I had come by the sword and would die by the sword, not otherwise. There was a last hope: a letter in my pocket from the mysterious Lisa Sonne, rider of the glasnost bandwagon. Listen attentively.

At some stage word of our endeavor had reached an acquaintance of mine, George Olczak, who runs a small, San Francisco-based "Arts and Sciences Productions," and he decided the project would make an interesting documentary. Through Olczak word reached Lisa Sonne, a producer who had been responsible for Sheffield Labs' "Moscow Sessions" (the first recordings of an American conductor in Moscow) and she resolved to capture the world premiere of the great concerto live.

Inequities of the artist's life! An American composer might wait years for a concerto to be performed, yet alone recorded; to be enshrined by celluloid is beyond imagination. An American writer might receive 150 rejections to get a novel published, only to find it remaindered in Barnes and Noble three months later. Yet here were two producers clamoring after a Soviet composer totally unknown in the United States to record on disc and film a work no one had ever heard before. Alas. I agreed only to write up for George a synopsis of the odyssey to date, with biographies of Baskin, Raskatov (more telexes) and myself, but my limits were approaching exponentially and I would leave documentaries and digital recordings in other hands.

I did not get off so easily. Sonne, through her work on "The Moscow Sessions," knew Dmitri Kitaenko, the conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic and she spoke to him about the project while he was in the US. Apparently he had shown interest and I received a letter from Sonne's office to Olczak advising me to phone Kitaenko should I be in Moscow. Now I was in Moscow and two days after facing a deserted Gorky Street at 2:00 A.M., with a clearer mind but not much confidence I phoned Kitaenko at his home.

"*Gospodin* Kitaenko?"

"Yes?"

A few words of introduction. "I understand that you viewed some of Olczak's productions and showed interest in premiering the concerto for a possible documentary."

"I showed no such interest. I left the cassettes behind in America. But if you'd like, come by my office tomorrow after the rehearsal and we'll talk about it."

At the appointed hour Sasha and I walked into Kitaienko's office in the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall and were met by the orchestra manager. Are you Russian? No, I had been denied that privilege. Born here at least? No, I am afraid not. I'm just the oboist who commissioned this piece. Oboist? My colleague. He extends his hand. I teach oboe at one of the musical institutes. Pleasantries over. He explains that the orchestra is booked for 18 months. "Do you know what's going to happen in eighteen months? I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow." The conversation is reminiscent of the evening with Sondetskis: the Moscow Philharmonic couldn't fund any concert, since the next season is already scheduled, and the country was sublimating from amorphous solid to gas so that approaching Gosconcert was probably hopeless. That we already know.

Eventually Kitaienko himself appeared, sweating from the rehearsal but in a good mood, and he repeated what the manager had already told us. The crusade appeared to be over, no dishonor; Sasha and I exchanged glances and made ready to depart. At that moment, which will be remembered in the annals, Kitaienko asked offhandedly, "What is the concerto scored for?"

"Oboe and fifteen strings."

"Oh, then you don't want the full Philharmonic, you just want our chamber ensemble."

"Of course."

"Why didn't you say so?" exclaims the manager, "I'd have told you the same thing myself."

"The chamber ensemble is conducted by our concertmaster Valentin Zhuk. Why don't you talk to him."

Then a miracle occurred.

Valentin Isaakievich Zhuk walked through the door.

And once more into the breach. It so happened, Zhuk told us, that in November he was planning a concert for which he'd like to do the Concerto for Oboe and Harp by Schnittke, performed once in the Composers Union auditorium nearly twenty

years ago and not since. There was also an open slot on the program. If Baskin would agree to play both concertos, it was entirely possible something could be arranged. Zhuk of course would need to look over Raskatov's score and I would have to ask Ted. A few days later, Zhuk approved the concerto.

As is said in strategic circles, we were cautiously elated. All that remained to be done was to find enough rubles for a week in a hotel. No hard currency was involved, only Monopoly money. Only. Even Soviet organizations must pay five times the nominal rate for foreign guests. Philharmonic expenses were already allotted for the season so they refused and Zhuk suggested we contact the Composers Union. Two Moscow composers would be featured on the program and it was the duty of the Moscow Composers Union to propagandize Moscow composers. What could be more natural?

A few weeks later Raskatov and I sit next door to his condemned apartment house in an office lined with posters, dominated by two concert grands, and across a conference table face the head of the Moscow Branch of the Soviet Composers Union, Georgi Dmitriev, who a year earlier had been my pleasant charge in New York. Now I saw the face of a bureaucrat, or perhaps a medieval lord at the center of his fiefdom.

The comedy began in earnest when a secretary poked her head in to ask whether Dmitriev planned to attend a Party meeting that evening. "Yes, I suppose," he answered before turning to me with an embarrassed apology. "I'm not a member of the Party, you understand, but because of my position I have to go to these meetings."

The conversation went downhill from there. When the question of the premiere was raised, Dmitriev first accused Baskin of breaking last fall's agreement and Sasha of voluntarily withdrawing the concerto; the Composers Union was not guilty of anything. I objected that Baskin had not agreed to come while the question of travel expenses had not been settled, and Sasha defended himself by saying there was no choice in withdrawing the concerto—there was no soloist. In any case, we had come merely to find out whether the Composers Union was still willing to pay local expenses. Two Moscow composers were on the program.

"You shouldn't look at the Composers Union as a source of money. Why hasn't the Moscow Philharmonic agreed to pay?"

"The season is already scheduled."

"This is entirely different. The concert isn't part of the Autumn Festival."

"What if it were?"

"Then maybe something could be arranged."

"All right, if Zhuk agrees, there will be Zhuk and Zhukov."

Zhukov was the conductor of the festival orchestra and, by all accounts, not a good one. If Sasha's remark had been calculated to ignite Dmitriev, it did.

"Sasha, this is really offensive. Tony here is our friend. It's not proper to talk like this..."

"All I meant was they'd both be conducting at the festival."

"Well, Zhuk's group is of course very good but it isn't the festival orchestra. In any case, the program would have to be changed, since we're only interested in modern music. What else is on the program?"

"I don't know. Probably standards."

"Anyway, we'd have to change the Schnittke, since he already has a piece in the festival. We'd also have to look over your concerto." A pause. "But I think we would almost certainly accept it."

This was the Dmitriev who, almost exactly one year ago, had himself guaranteed the concerto's premiere at the 1988 festival. Sasha, barely containing his temper, asks what needs to be done, and Dmitriev delivers a final blow:

"Go to England, have a good time. Visit Tony in the States. I signed all the documents."

So that was it. After one or two attempts to clarify what connection the Autumn Festival has with Sasha's attendance at a London music festival or an invitation I had recently obtained for him to visit me in Princeton, the guillotine falls. "Let's put an end to this. Write me what you need in a letter."

Sasha left the Composers Union in a fury, claiming that Dmitriev hated anyone who composed better than himself and he vowed never again to submit a composition to the Moscow Autumn Festival or let one be performed. I was not so upset, having had my life ruined by such types often enough before. The lesson here, though, was an exceptional one. Americans,

living in a crystal, have the peculiar notion that the Soviet Union being (until recently) a totalitarian state, is a structure even more tightly bound by laws. In the past, any Soviet laws protected the state from the individual, exactly contrary to the Western notion of law. These laws prohibited the individual from doing anything and so were ignored. Others have said that in the Soviet Union for every law there is an antilaw. In either case the result is equivalent to no law. If the Composers Union promotes certain Uzbek and Armenian composers it is because certain functionaries, under the influence of cognac, promote them. If certain talented composers go unrecognized it is because certain functionaries obstruct them. The Composers Union, like the Soviet Union itself, is turning into a gas and so is not run by deterministic laws. When causality is absent anything is permitted. The new Supreme Soviet is passing laws to induce a phase transition to a more ordered state.

Although Sasha was despondent, it occurred to me that in the age of reformation, orthodoxy might be the answer. Perestroika has seen the birth of innumerable cooperative cafes, restaurants and factories—and several cooperative Russian Orthodox choirs. The conductor of perhaps the first of these was an old friend and I put the question to her business manager. “Nothing to it. Raskatov should invite Baskin as a personal guest. It’s easy enough now; about two months are needed to process the documents.” That was good news. In the past it took a year and you never got a visa.

So there we were. We would bypass all official obstructions, the internationally renowned oboist would sleep on Sasha’s couch and we would extend Dmitriev a personal invitation to the concert. The realization of our success gradually descended upon me. Only one who has been defeated time and time again by the Soviet Union can imagine the absolute joy, the rapture, the ecstasy which at that moment came with the knowledge I had almost singlehandedly outwitted the most monstrous bureaucracy on the face of the earth. No other feeling quite approaches it.

On May 2, after the cinders of May Day fireworks had darkened, I flew into the sunset with confidence in my heart and a set of beautiful parts to the concerto, copied by the best scribe

in Moscow, paid for by the Composers Union. Glory to Socialist Labor!

VIII. Dies Irae

Rapture, of course, can be premature.

For a time all signs remained favorable. Ted agreed sight unseen to play the Schnittke (a decision I am sure he came to regret permanently), Zhuk agreed to send a score and oboe part post haste, an official letter of invitation scheduling the concert for November 25 was on its way from the Moscow Philharmonic, Sasha confirmed that to invite Ted as a personal guest would be straightforward.

The auspices began to turn only with the seasons. A month went by, six weeks, no sign of score or part, or for that matter a letter of invitation. It was now June, only five months away from the concert. Sasha assured me an invitation from Zhuk was in the mail. But the music? The Russian penchant for miracles was at work here. What if the Schnittke turned out to need a year of preparation? Did they expect Ted to learn it in a month?

My patience ran out—I would have to find a copy in the West. My first attempts are fruitless: it is unavailable, never published; no says Laurel Fay, the score is in my hands, published by Universal twenty years ago; yes says the Midwest distributor, but to backorder it will take months. Finally, Laurel sends me a perusal copy from Schirmer's.

One glance at the score and—I am annihilated. Apart from Berio's *Sequenza*, was anything so difficult? Flutter-tonguing, multiphonics, glissandos, every trick in the piss-and-fart school of music. All of which Ted hated and struggled to avoid. Not a moment to lose; Federal Express whisks off an enlarged xerox of the score and two days later I phone Karen expecting psychic destruction.

"No problem," she shrugs. "He has August off."

To rely on Ted's supernatural powers was to expect a miracle of the second kind, to rely on the Soviet Union was to expect a miracle of the first kind. Official letters of invitation did eventually arrive and another copy of the Universal score—but no

oboe part. By now Ted was convinced a concert was possible and the real work (absent from this chronicle) began. I saw him during his August retreat, when he spending five hours a day on the concertos, and with each new flutter-tongue, second thoughts insinuated themselves further. Ted complained bitterly that the Schnittke would be impossible to learn properly without a part. Either he had one within two weeks or he would refuse to perform it. Besides, neither Schnittke nor Raskatov showed off the oboe in its best traditional manner. We should substitute the Vaughn Williams for the Schnittke and reschedule Schnittke for a later date. *He* would pay travel expenses. And furthermore, we must add a Vivaldi concerto to the program.

Rocks and hard places surrounded me. I relayed Baskin's ultimatum to Raskatov, who with his wife was by that time visiting me in Princeton. No, Schnittke is the country's most famous composer and will serve as the drawing card. Ted must perform the concerto. A midnight phone call to Zhuk confirmed the worst: Some time ago a Russian oboist had walked off with the music and never returned it. *A part did not exist in the Soviet Union.*

Death and fatality! Zhuk would copy out the part *by hand* and send it to Baskin in September when the Moscow Philharmonic was on tour in Germany.

"But what conductor schedules such a concerto when he doesn't have the music?"

"We can only apologize for our countrymen, but really, am I guilty? This is not my problem."

I was in the mood for a part, not apologies, and did what I should have done months earlier: phone Universal in Vienna. No, the part is not published, yes we have a rental copy. Would you be so kind to send a xerox to Baskin? Bill me. Certainly, with pleasure. A week later Ted had a copy in hand. He was happy, I was charged \$10. A toast to German efficiency!

But the battle for the music turned out to be merely a skirmish. Tales of Soviet visas are more numerous than mosquitos in a New Jersey swamp and less pleasant. This one is exceptional; I recount it hoping the next generation will exterminate them all. In a letter written only a few days after my departure from Moscow, Sasha outlined clearly the procedure by which he could

invite Baskin: Ted should send him two visa applications, notarized in the Soviet consulate in Montreal. Sasha would submit them to OVIR, the Department of Visas and Registration, and in four to six weeks he would receive Ted's visa and mail it to him. The procedure made slightly more sense than the White Sea Canal but it was at least well-defined.

The White Sea Canal is usually frozen but, as I've said, the Soviet Union is sublimating and informational links do not extend the distance from one end of a cafeteria queue to the other; it was unreasonable to assume the Montreal consulate would respect procedures laid down by OVIR, 6,000 kilometers away. Karen innocently set off for the consulate and requested a visa application, explaining that Ted was being invited as a personal guest. No, we cannot help you. Such an invitation requires an official letter from Moscow; without one the application cannot be processed. Despite my pre-trial pep talks Karen was despondent, never having faced the Soviet bureaucratic barrier before. Perhaps I should have phoned the consulate myself (M-F, 10:00 A.M.-12:00 noon) but anyone who has ever tried to penetrate the Soviet busy signal in Washington knows better. Instead I stupidly told Karen to get two visa applications, have them notarized anywhere and send them off with photos to Moscow via DHL. A week later—

Disaster. Without the idiotic consular stamp OVIR refused to accept the application. By now it was mid July and Sasha frantic. The plan had been for Ted to leave in mid October on the Symphony's Asian tour, then fly direct from Seoul to Moscow on November 17 for our concert. Foreseeing at least one consular blockade was no act of prophesy and I had told Sasha that Ted must have a visa by early September. I lied.

Unaware of my deception, Sasha's father, a member of the Writers Union, took matters into his own hands and lay siege to the very Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This concert is an important one, the US State Department is supporting it, the soloist is internationally recognized. If I had indeed stormed a US State Department surrounded by a layered defense of functionaries, guards and unlisted phone numbers, then you would have some idea of the extremity of the senior Raskatov's action. He failed in his mission to extract a visa, but he did persuade them to telex

the Montreal consulate, authorizing them to stamp a new set of visa applications.

We repeated the entire process. In early August, dashing from the consulate to the airport for a week's stint at the Hollywood Bowl, Karen dropped a second set of forms into the post box and I DHL'd them to Moscow. *Gospodi pomilui.*

In retrospect, the visa struggle turned out to be a skirmish. Late August also saw the convergence of serious problems. Sasha and Olya arrived in mid-month for a three-week visit and, while their stay proved to be more pleasant than not, some of my most deeply-rooted fears came true. It is written that the Russe are past masters at upping the stakes and for ten years I have searched unsuccessfully for the limits. My eternal naivety in this matter never ceases to amaze me; otherwise I can only conclude I harbor masochistic tendencies. In terms of the current comedy, from the start Sasha's correspondence was dominated by a practical element, and once in America the dragon's teeth bore fruit.

Uppermost in his mind was Olczak's documentary, Sonne's recording and a determination to get an invitation to teach at an American university. "Olczak should use our presence here to his advantage and interview us now." The fact that Olczak had failed to interest any sponsors and was without the half million dollars needed to produce his film made no impression on Sasha whatsoever. Neither did the impasse between Baskin and Sonne: Ted refused to allow her to record the concert live on the grounds that a live recording of the Schnittke was insane, and Sonne refused to make a studio recording on the grounds that it cost too much. "But this would be such an advertisement for Baskin," Sasha maintained.

The next question was whether I had begun to think about the American premiere.

"Sasha, we haven't even accomplished the first step."

"Yes, but it's time to start thinking about the second."

"I am not an impresario, I am not connected with an orchestra. The conductor of the Princeton Chamber Symphony has agreed to give the premiere here in two years. That is all I can promise you."

"Two years! That's a long time. Besides, Princeton is a small town, it would be better for Ted to do it in Montreal."

"Sasha, the first thing you must understand is that America is not waiting for you. I have done everything in my power to get this concerto performed. I cannot do any more."

"I think we've all done what has been necessary."

So arrogant are the Russians that they yield nothing even to one another; they constantly strive for place and, on that account, often become involved in altercations. As a result of this altercation, I was ready to punch Aleksandr Mikhailovich Raskatov in the mouth. My mood became uglier. By August I had left *Scientific American* and because (for reasons which are at this moment incomprehensible to me) I was scheduled to spend autumn in the Big Onion on the National Academy of Sciences-Soviet Academy of Sciences exchange, I had neglected my own travel plans. But the reliable days of stagnation, when every Russian was frozen at home, are over and days of restructuring have seen Russian scientists become globetrotting juggernauts; everyone who has not left wants to. At the usual last minute the Soviet Academy refused to accept me because my colleagues had vanished. Attempts to reschedule the visit or restation me at the Shternberg Astronomical Institute failed: by now the country was in such chaos that the NAS telexes went unanswered.

Expecting my official trip to fall through, I mentioned to Sasha that I might need a personal invitation. He balked. Time was getting short and "it would be a lot of trouble."

"Yes, it would be a lot of trouble." I said and walked away.

Later Sasha expressed surprise that I could possibly have gotten the idea that he was not willing to do anything in his power to invite me. "Perhaps you don't understand the subtleties of Russian. To have the concert go on without you would be stupid." Sasha and I have since made some sort of peace, but the August conversations marked for me a turning point. I would no longer put on this concert for him, for adventure, for obligation, for pleasure, for revenge. I would put it on for the music, for Ted and to get it over with.

Internal philosophical quandaries are important but unmeasurable on the external world's Richter scale. It was Karen who first noticed the crack that turned into an earthquake. In Zhuk's initial letter of invitation, the concert was scheduled for November 25; in the second letter, which came from the orchestra

management, it was scheduled for November 26. Ted had agreed to the 25th, but the 26th—impossible. He had to be back in Montreal on the 27th for a rehearsal. When was the concert?

The 26th. The Tchaikovsky Hall had been commandeered on the 25th for the Verdi Requiem and the Verdi Requiem, lachrymose, would not submit to rescheduling. Zhuk claimed that when I first wrote to him in May, Ted had agreed to the 24th, 25th or 26th, so he had not thought twice about rescheduling the concert. I do not remember the detail. But history was repeating itself. Last year the Composers Union scheduled a concert without verifying that funds were available; this year, weeks after agreeing on the 25th, Zhuk rescheduled a concert without verifying whether the new date was still available. A miracle did not occur. The Montreal Symphony management refused to release Ted for the 27th and in an instant, all our plans collapsed.

A week of midnight phone calls to Moscow and Montreal resulted in a resurrection date: January 3rd, 1990. Our nerves were frayed, we had wearied of the endeavor. We agreed it would be the final attempt, the true resurrection. It was Ted's vacation, it was the Russian Winter Festival. Nothing could go wrong now.

Really, three months is too long to avoid negative miracles. A potential (as opposed to actual) disaster capped the tale of the Baskin visa. In October Karen received from Raskatov what he claimed was Ted's visa. But my latent skepticism got the better of me (I refused to believe even the Soviets would require visas to be sent through Soviet post) and I asked Karen to describe the document. She puzzled out the cyrillic letters. I interrupt. Is there a photo? No. Whatever this is, it is not a visa. Raise the consulate.

Indeed, it was a visa voucher. A visa was ours! (in principle). Except the consulate was closing at noon and the orchestra was to leave for Asia the next day. Impossible to get. Only the rescheduling of the concert for January 3 which prevented potentialities from becoming actualities. Ted no longer needed a visa before the tour; Karen would snatch it up on the orchestra's return in November. And thus did two disasters annihilate each other.

The past is prelude, a maxim to remember. I had anticipated much, had averted less, but never in my darkest socialist nightmares did I imagine what was to come next. When the NAS telexes to the Soviet Academy continued to go unanswered, I nearly gave up the idea of attending the concert. Time was now too short for Sasha to invite me and I no longer wanted him to. But Ted was threatening not to go without me. The importance of being stuck ... From my April business trip to Moscow I knew that if VAAP or the Moscow Philharmonic telexed me an official invitation, I could have a visa within two days. VAAP had tired of me long ago, but perhaps the Philharmonic... I phoned Sasha to see whether an invitation would be issued.

"The Philharmonic will not issue an invitation because the Philharmonic is not playing the concert."

"What are you saying?"

"Zhuk has defected."

IX. Round Four – Triumphal March

Zhuk has defected. Those were Raskatov's words. Whether one can actually defect in the age of perestroika is a question best left to television analysts. Only one thing was clear: when the Moscow Philharmonic returned from its European tour, it returned without Zhuk. He had stayed behind. In Amsterdam. More even his wife did not know. Weeks later, we learned he had remained in Amsterdam with the Philharmonic's harpist to audition for the Concertgebouw Orchestra. With the harpist! They were undoubtedly fleeing the Schnittke.

And God said: Let this endeavor fail, let this concert not happen. It was enough to make me find religion. Yet this time Sasha's mood was upbeat: A new orchestra, under the baton of Mikhail Yurovsky, conductor of the Stanislavsky Opera Theatre and Principal Guest Conductor of the Dresden State Opera Orchestra, had agreed to take over the concert. It would be centered around Ted: he would play the Brandenburg No. 2, a Vivaldi concerto of his choice, the Raskatov and the Schnittke. As a bonus the program would be repeated for television. There was a catch: the Philharmonic had given away the Tchaikovsky Hall on January 3rd and to keep it the concert would have to be rescheduled for December 22, 1989.

At that moment I was struck dumb and incapable of comprehending what had happened. Later Sasha recounted that as soon as the Philharmonic management heard of Zhuk's defection, they canceled the concert. Sasha was outraged. There were other conductors in Moscow, why did the concert have to be cancelled? He got no clear answer; without Zhuk the chamber ensemble of the Moscow Philharmonic apparently ceased to exist. Sasha called them bastards, an expression you do not use in Russian unless you expect consequences.

To add injury to decapitation, the Philharmonic management expected Sasha to inform Ted of the cancellation. "I'm only the composer, you scheduled the concert. You write him." The debate over guilt went on until Sasha pointed out that the official letter of invitation came from the Director of the Moscow Philharmonic. At that point the general manager capitulated but still asked Sasha to bring over Baskin's address because "it was too much trouble to find the letter" and there was no more time to discuss it by phone.

Then a miracle occurred.

While in the Philharmonic office to deliver Baskin's address, Sasha overheard the name Yurovsky, a conductor who had performed several of his works before.

Then a miracle occurred.

Not two months earlier, in the chaos of perestroika, Yurovsky had formed his own chamber ensemble, with members of the Opera Theatre orchestra and the Moscow Philharmonic, and he agreed to take over the concert.

Then a miracle occurred.

Yurovsky's group, so new that it did not even have a proper name, was listed with a fledgling, independent concert agency, Sovinart, itself under a new umbrella organization *Muza* (Muse). At first *Muza* showed no interest in sponsoring the concert, but Yurovsky pointed out that they would be advertised along with America's National Endowment for the Arts and the chance of such immense publicity converted them to the cause. Furthermore, Sovinart had a professional manager and—miracles of miracles, a fax machine—who would contact Baskin directly, leaving me out of it.

When I hung up the phone, in a complete state of shock, I did not know these details; I knew only that "the concert has been

saved" by some Yurovsky and his orchestra and that the new, professional manager should have already contacted Baskin. But how could they have contacted Baskin? He was playing Bizet somewhere in the Far East. What if December 22 was unavailable to him? What if he refused to play with an unknown orchestra? They might be amateurs. The Soviet side, in a fashion which should by now be recognizable, had not asked the soloist whether salvation was acceptable to him. I concluded that the concert had yet to be saved and phoned Ted's mother to put her on alert. "When Karen returns this weekend, the first thing you tell her is: thou shalt not freak out."

Karen did not freak out. A manager did call, not from Sovinart or Muza, but from a new international consortium Interbyte, which was apparently the organization planning to televise the concert. She gave Karen a fax number to which she could refer questions.

Then a miracle occurred.

The week of December 22 Ted was only scheduled to play the *Messiah* (Halleluia!) and because he had performed that duty eight years in a row, management released him.

Then a miracle did not occur.

The faxes from Montreal went unanswered. By now Thanksgiving had come and gone, little more than three weeks remained before the concert date, and Ted still knew nothing about the conductor, the harpist, the orchestra or the rehearsal schedule. Worse, skeptical that the concert would be resurrected, he had let the Schnittke and Raskatov lie fallow on the Asian tour and there was no longer time to get them in shape. "It's just too late," said Karen.

Another miracle.

Interbyte suddenly pulled out of the endeavor but faxed Yurovsky's home telephone number; Yurovsky spoke English and I urged Ted to phone him. He did. Suddenly, on Friday morning, December 1, word came from Montreal that all systems were go. Sunday was the deadline for airline bookings. Karen would book a flight today.

But I still had no official invitation and without one a visa would be impossible to obtain.

And yet another.

That day, while lunching in New York with my ex-colleagues from *Scientific American*, I learned that a telex received at Schirmer's was enroute to *Scientific American*. An invitation from VAAP awaited. According to Raskatov, the VAAP officials initially refused to issue one on the grounds that they did not want to be responsible for me in Moscow, but he threatened to defect to a new cooperative agency unless they relented. Five hours after I received the telex a flight was booked and a visa application was on its way to Washington. The phone bill registered 7.9 on the Richter scale.

X. Apotheosis

We flew into the sunrise with string parts for the Vivaldi on December 17th. One other unfortunate coincidence took place: three days earlier Andrei Sakharov died. It happens that I had become friendly with Sakharov through work on his memoirs and I desperately wanted to attend the funeral, which was to be held the morning of our arrival. Despite frantic last-minute efforts, it was impossible to book an earlier flight and we missed the ceremonies. I did ask Yurovsky to dedicate the concert to Sakharov's memory. He had been thinking along the same lines, had already added Albinoni's famous Adagio to the program in memoriam and agreed to consider my request.

After that, no miracles occurred and none were needed. The next days were full of rehearsals, which proceeded (smoothly). The Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 features a solo piccolo trumpet, but the trumpeter became ill. A second—and better—version exists for piccolo French horn. The horn player did an excellent job—until he was in an automobile accident and his horn was smashed. An official at the Composers Union tore down a poster Sasha had hung up on the grounds that permission had not been requested.

The concert took place at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, the Soviet Union's equivalent of Carnegie Hall, on December 22, 1989, just as fighting broke out in Bucharest. I do not know how many people attended the revolution but about 800 came to hear an evening of oboe music. Yurovsky announced the concert was dedicated to the memory of Andrei Sakharov. The program listed Ted as oboist with the Ottawa Symphony. The horn player

performed the Brandenburg on an ordinary horn with acceptable results and a bloody lip. Sasha's concerto turned out to be an excellent work, both modern and accessible, and was well received. I still hope to perform it. With Ted's ornamentation the Vivaldi C major proved to be the one of his 500 concertos not written with a stencil. About fifty people walked out during the Schnittke. Ted was reasonably satisfied with his own performance. Other musicians said they had never heard anything like it. For his labors, Ted received from *Muza* 200 rubles (\$33) and transportation to the airport at 5 AM; this proved critical when three solid hours of phoning for a cab produced only a busy signal at the dispatcher.

Interbyte did not film the program because the manager had left the country without passing on instructions and none of his subordinates would take responsibility. Whether the concert was actually part of the Russian Winter Festival is debatable; whether the Russian Winter Festival actually existed outside a program booklet is also debatable. Ted was interviewed by Radio Moscow, Soviet Culture and Soviet Music, though I haven't seen the results. The same Moscow Philharmonic official who canceled the concert after Zhuk's defection overheard Ted practicing and immediately invited him to perform the Mozart Oboe Concerto with the orchestra next season. Expenses paid. The trio from Tishchenko has yet to arrive. As he writes "the wagon hasn't moved." Nothing happened with a Moscow production of my play. Raskatov received his invitation to an American university; he has promised me a trio. Yurovsky has asked me to help find him an invitation to conduct in the States.

The cost of the concerto was of course much more than the initial \$500, in dollars, in time, in blood. Was it worth it? Probably not; my main feeling at concert's end was one of relief. When we reflected on how it had all come about, Sasha's answer was succinct: "four Jews." It never would have occurred to me. I prefer to think nature abhors a vacuum. Under Brezhnev the endeavor would never have gotten underway. Under perestroika causality is absent, everything is permitted. With myriad forces working in random directions, all attempts to prevent the concert cancelled out. A vacuum was created and we were poised. Then a miracle occurred.

And, truly, who would not marvel at this?

Random Discography

On LP:

Aleksandr Raskatov, *Concerto for Oboe and String Orch.*, World Premiere Recording, Theodore Baskin oboe, Mikhail Yurovsky cond., Melodiya (in preparation).

Alfred Schnittke, *Symphony #3*, USSR Ministry of Culture Orch., Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, Melodiya C10 25175 009.

Alfred Schnittke, *Symphony #4*, USSR Ministry of Culture Orch., Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, Melodiya A10 00271 005.

Alfred Schnittke, *Concerto For Cello and Orch.*, Natalia Gutman cello, USSR Ministry of Culture Orch., Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, Melodiya A10 0000355 004.

Rodion Shchedrin, *Dead Souls*, Bolshoi Theatre Soloists, Chorus and Orchestra, Yuri Temirkanov, Melodiya C10 17441 6.

Rodion Shchedrin, *Piano Music*, Rodion Shchedrin, piano, Melodiya C10 18131 2.

Boris Tishchenko, *Concerto for Cello and Orch.*, Mstislav Rostropovich cello, Leningrad Philharmonic, Igor Blazhkov, Melodiya-Angel SR 40091.

Boris Tishchenko, *Concerto for Harp and Chamber Orch.*, Irina Donskaya harp, Leningrad Orch. of Old and New Music, Edward Serov, Melodiya C10 12401 2.

On CD:

Sophia Gubaydulina, *Chamber Pieces for Bayan (Accordion), Organ, Cello and String Orch.*, Arts & Electronics, AED 68005.

Alfred Schnittke, *Symphony #3*, Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Eri Klas, BIS-CD-477.

Alfred Schnittke, *Chamber Works*, Mobile Fidelity, MFCD915.

Alfred Schnittke, *Concerto Grosso 1, Concerto for Oboe and Harp, Concerto for Piano and Strings*, New Stockhloam Chamber Orchestra, BIS-CD-377.

Rodion Shchedrin, *Carmen Ballet*, Los Angles Chamber Orchestra, Gerard Schwarz, Angel/EMI, CD-7 471982

Boris Tishchenko, *Violin Concerto 2*, Sergei Stadler vio., Leningrad Philharmonic, Vasily Sinaisky, Melodiya, MCD 123.

Works by other composers not mentioned in article:

Gia Kancelli, *Symphonies #4 & #5*, Georgian State Symph. Orch., Dzhangug Kaxidze, Melodiya C10 12551 2.

Gavril Popov, *Chamber Symphony in Music of the Early Post-October Years*, Bolshoi Theatre Soloists Ensemble, Aleksandr Lazarev, Melodiya C10 25031 009.

Valentin Silvestrov, *Symphony #5*, Kiev Conservatory Orch., Roman Kofman, Melodiya C10 27029 008.

Georgi Sviridov, *Pushkin's Garland*, Moscow & Novosibirsk Chamber Choirs, Vladimir Minin, Melodiya C10 15903 004.

Avet Terteryan, *Symphony #6*, Bolshoi Theatre Soloists Ensemble, Aleksandr Lazarev, Melodiya C10 25665 005.

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